Basic Resources for Exploring the United Church of Christ

Events

- Association and Conference meetings
- Worship in local churches of the Association
- Training events sponsored by the UCC for church leaders, educators, clergy, new and renewing pastors, and lay leaders
- Public events sponsored by the churches of the Association; Evangelism Ministry Team, others

Web sites

- <www.ucc.org>: includes the Constitution and Bylaws, the book "Hidden Histories in the UCC," links to your Conference Web site, and much more.
- <www.stillspeaking.org>: general information on the UCC, its history and identity.
- <www.spiritseasons.com>: the UCC participates in the design of this lectionary-based curriculum.

Denominational Resources

- Catalogs are available from United Church of Christ Resources, 1-800-325-7061. Some resources may be available on loan from the Conference or Association.
- The United Church of Christ *Desk Calendar* lists national Covenanted Ministries and their resources.
- *The Leaders' Box* has information for lay leaders and clergy on traditional church roles and structure.

Links to Pilgrim Press and the United Church Press are also available on-line.

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Considering a New Church Covenant

in the

United Church of Christ

A Process for Exploring, Developing, and Affirming New Relationships

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

A Multiracial, Multicultural,

Open & Affirming,

Accessible to All Church

“Covenant” in the Constitution of the UCC

The word “covenant” is at the heart and foundation of the polity, practice, history, and theology of the United Church of Christ. Covenant is what holds us together as a church: our understanding of ourselves as a people in relationship with one another and with God. We are ***bound together by our common faith*** in Jesus Christ, as Son of God, Savior, and sole head of the church (Constitution and Bylaws of the UCC, Preamble, par. 2). ***Our mutual Christian concern, dedication, and responsibility for one another creates a bond which is not one of rules and regulation, but instead one discerned in common, and in community*** (Article III, par. 6).

Ministry in the UCC takes place in an atmosphere of covenant. Local Churches work with one another in Associations and Conferences, and with others in national and global ministries, to carry out God’s mission. The UCC holds a biennial gathering of the ***General Synod***, where delegates from throughout the church come together to discern God’s call as made known to us for the UCC (Article 1X, par. 53). Actions, decisions, and advice of General Synod, of Conferences, and of Associations are to be “held in the highest regard” by local churches (Article V, par. 19). “Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God’s will and be faithful to God’s mission” (Article 3, par. 6).

A local church becomes a part of the UCC by uniting with other local churches in a covenantal relationship (Article V, par. 17). This relationship is one characterized by trust, mutual commitment, promises, and the kind of shared experiences which are rooted in commitment to God. All parts of the church–Association, Conference, and Wider Church–participate in this relationship, discerning God’s will together.

Church Covenant in the UCC

Welcome!

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Introduction to the United Church of Christ

The United Church of Christ (UCC) welcomes your church's inquiry about exploring union with our denomination. Our relationships in the UCC are based on COVENANT, and we hope you will come to understand what this means to our life together. This booklet will describe a **process of mutual exploration** which will help your local church, and your local association of the UCC, to decide whether you wish to enter into a formal covenanted relationship. It will also give a bit of history and some tools to help you begin the process.

Over the years, the UCC has been enriched by already-existing congregations which have become a part of the denomination. Some were relatively new; others brought rich, varied histories. Whether by a common purpose in the pursuit of justice, or through spiritual affinities, or with common denominational traditions, all have found homes in the diverse theological and traditional landscape of the UCC. All have desired to express a sense of connection to a wider church. Each one adds to the unfolding sense of what it means to be a ***united, and uniting, church***.

Our diverse traditions make it natural for us to welcome new churches into conversation with our denomination. We are glad you want to consider a relationship with the UCC, one which will become uniquely yours and ours. This booklet supports the work of the Associations of the UCC, the setting at which local churches connect. You'll explore membership in partnership with the Association, even if you are not yet certain whether you will choose to join the UCC. Local churches join the UCC by securing ***local church standing*** from their geographic Association. In some areas, it may be the Conference (acting as an Association) which grants standing.

A Brief Introduction to the History of the United Church of Christ

The communion of the UCC is part of the historical ecumenical movement, and is deeply rooted in the history of our country, and in the Protestant Reformation. The UCC itself was founded in 1957 from a merger of two predecessor bodies. These were the Evangelical and Reformed Church, and the Congregational Christian churches. Both of these were themselves joined in previous denominational mergers.

As you explore the history of the UCC in more depth you will learn the stories of the Christian Church, the Congregational Churches, the Evangelical Synod of North America, and the Reformed Church. Understanding our roots is key to understanding the unique, diverse body we form today.

But as important as these stories are, we are not limited to the history of four different religious institutions toward merger. We have always welcomed, and been enriched by, members of many other cultures. The United Church of Christ is **intentionally inclusive and pluralistic**. As a uniting church, we seek ways to fulfill our scriptural mandate: "That they may all be one" (John 17:21).

It is important for each UCC church to understand that we intend to be faithful to our denominational heritage and to its historical missions. **Our past** gives us inspiring examples of a church seeking justice and God's shalom throughout the world! We honor these commitments in our own time.

As you explore our history in detail you will discover these commitments, which bind us to our calling as a church, both locally and globally. Our history is not a dead past, but the foundation of our vocation.

Affirming Covenant

Final Stage: Request for Standing

During this phase the Association receives the formal request from the Church in Covenant Development, acts upon it, and formally accepts and grants standing in the UCC to the local church. The timing of this vote will usually be determined by the Association's meeting schedule, but will be taken within a year of the formal request.

At this point in the process, the only likely outcome will be a vote to grant standing as a local church of the United Church of Christ, made with enthusiasm born of being in God's mission together as the whole people of God.

The Association, with its newly received member church, will want to consecrate this moment in its journey by the worship of God, and the celebration of the community's oneness in Christ.

That they may all be one.

—John 17:21

That They May All Be One

In our quest to bring the gospel to our world, the United Church of Christ has often been boldly **ahead of its time**, living into a future of God's shalom. Our heritage of social justice includes strong roles in the American Revolution and vigorous antislavery efforts, including work with and on behalf of the Amistad captives. We were the first mainline Protestant church to ordain an African American to preach (1785), the first church in modern times to ordain a woman (1853), and the first to ordain an openly gay pastor (1972).

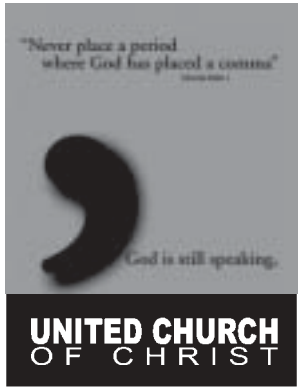
Local church representatives in many settings have professed our aim to be a church which is multiracial and multicultural; which is open to, and affirming of, all God's people; and which is accessible to all. **All** who are open and called are invited to share our communal life in the covenants set forth in the Constitution and Bylaws of the UCC, and in the UCC statement of faith.

Regardless of our religious or ethnic backgrounds,

we acknowledge our oneness in Jesus Christ,

whom we claim as the

sole head of the church.



Entering into Covenant

Roles and Responsibilities

Through the process of exploration, your church and an Association (or Conference) of the United Church of Christ will build a relationship. When this relationship is fully developed, both parties will have gained a ***deep understanding and knowledge of one another, and of common commitments*** to faith, witness, and mission. A local church may then request standing in the Association of the United Church of Christ where it is located, and may be officially granted standing.

Each partner in the exploration will attempt to **discern God's will** through prayer, study of scripture, worship, and time set apart for listening for God's guidance.

Responsibility of the Local Church Approaching Covenant

By the time a church reaches the stage of formally seeking covenant, its members need to understand the identity, history, theology, and polity of the United Church of Christ. Preparation for this step will also include ***active participation in the life of the UCC***, in as many settings as possible.

Churches should form a committee in the early stages of exploration to represent the church in its contacts with the UCC, and to ensure wide participation and knowledge throughout the congregation. This group should also plan ways to introduce their own church to the Association and make its culture, traditions, and commitments deeply known and understood. See planning tips on the inside back cover of this pamphlet.



Affirming Covenant

Becoming a member of the UCC:

Determination to make a formal request for standing

Together, the Church in Covenanted Exploration and the Association affirm that it is God's will for the exploring church to seek standing in the United Church of Christ.

Remaining ecumenical partners:

Determination not to seek standing

Sometimes, either the Church in Covenanted Exploration, the Association, or both, (separately or mutually) discern that it is not God's will for the Church in Covenanted Exploration to seek standing.



Developing Covenant

During this phase the local church and Association enter into a formal relationship. Associations may vote to grant the local church a specific status as a church "*In Covenant Development.*" This status recognizes the ***commitment*** that both the church and the Association have made to deepen and broaden their knowledge of, and appreciation for, one another as church and denomination.

A Church in Covenant Development is granted ***voice without vote*** at Association and Conference meetings for the duration of the Exploration, and sending representatives to the meetings is an important way to further develop the relationship between church and denomination. Typically a full meeting of an Association takes place once a year, and a Conference conducts an annual meeting, so for that reason alone this phase of the process may last one to two years. Another factor which requires planning and ample time is the need to involve many members of the church and the Association developing covenant, and of the sponsoring church.

A suggested list of other means of exploring the United Church of Christ is included on the back cover of these guidelines. The church in Covenant Development will want to provide means for the Association to become involved in **its** life, as well, in ways that will assist the discernment process.

The Church and the Association developing covenant will remain in this relationship until both are comfortable that ample time and effort have been devoted to discerning God's will.

Until these final decisions are made, standing remains an option, and discernment is not concluded. Throughout this stage, a ***positive attitude toward standing*** is paired with a concern to honor the time and space for a ***faithful discernment process***.

There are two possible outcomes of this formal period of relationship building and discernment, each of which affirms the particular nature of the covenant developed by the Local Church and the Association.

Responsibility of the Association and Conference

In the UCC, the Association and Conference play the primary role in the process of Exploration of Local Churches. A representative will put you in touch with others who will work alongside you as together you explore a covenant relationship; often a committee, and a sponsoring church, are identified. The Conference and/or Association provide staff guidance, invitations to consultants from the Wider Church, and help with organizational matters.

Responsibility of the Sponsoring Church

The sponsoring church will provide friendship and welcome to your congregation, and will help introduce you to life as a United Church of Christ congregation. Sharing experiences with this church as you develop covenant relationships will help give your members a broad view of the denomination.

Representatives of the National Setting of the UCC

Representatives from the Covenanted Ministries of the United Church of Christ may play a role in the process, and may be invited to participate by the Association. In certain cases a staff member from a national ministry is involved from the beginning and works collaboratively with the Association throughout the process.

The Covenanted Ministries which serve the church at the national setting are: Local Church Ministries, Wider Church Ministries, Justice and Witness Ministries, and the Office of General Ministries.

Forming Covenant

Guidelines for the Process



Overview
The process has three main stages:

- Exploring
- Developing
- Affirming

a covenantal relationship between a local church and an Association of the United Church of Christ.

The first stage is a preliminary **exploration**, an introductory acquaintance which helps a church and Association decide if there is a likelihood for establishing a formal relationship. Questions to consider: why the UCC? What are the affinities we sense, why are we interested?

If both feel that there is a likelihood of covenant, they will agree to **develop** that covenant together. As with all relationships, it will take time and a wealth of shared experiences to help this covenant fully develop.

Should the development stage conclude with a request for standing, in all likelihood the final stage will be an **affirmation of covenant** for both parties.

Exploring Covenant

At this stage, a local church which wants to explore standing in the United Church of Christ initiates contact with the Conference or Association in which it's located. Informal discussions talk about history, polity and practice, as well as the reasons for exploration, and help determine whether a formal, intensive process will follow. Since a substantial initial knowledge is needed, this phase may take from 6 months to a year, depending on previous knowledge and the pace of the exploration. This initial acquaintance should be comprehensive enough to provide an answer to this central question:

Is it likely that a covenanted relationship will result from further exploration?

As deeply and sincerely as the UCC welcomes new local churches, we also recognize the **importance of discernment** in our lives together. Careful preliminary discussions should reveal God's will for a suitable relationship. Sometimes a local church and an Association of the UCC will decide to remain ecumenical colleagues but not to continue exploring covenant, at least for the present time. *We affirm our solidarity in Christ with all who believe, and celebrate our unity*, even if exploration ends at this phase.

If the discussion reveals the likelihood of a covenant commitment, the partners move on to further develop their relationship. The church and association then enter into a stage of "Covenant Development."

Covenant in the United Church of Christ

Church Considering Covenant	Sponsoring Church	Association
1. The leadership of a local Church which wishes to explore membership in the United Church of Christ approaches the Association of the UCC in which it is located, through a staff person or other member of the Association.		
		2. Through its appropriate body (for example, a Church Development Committee, or Church and Ministry Committee), the Association welcomes the exploring church and provides initial information, resources, and support to help the church.
3. Undertakes exploration of the UCC, including meeting with designated representatives of the Association.		3. Designates a contact person or committee to assist local church in its exploration. Receives information about the church that is exploring.
4. Determines whether exploration has shown a **likelihood** that further development of relationship will result in a covenant bond.		4. Determines whether exploration has shown a **likelihood** that further development of relationship will result in a covenant bond.
5a. If not: church and Association agree to remain as ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 5b. If so: the process of developing covenant begins with naming a committee or other subgroup to represent the Local Church, and with meeting the leaders of the Sponsoring Church.	5b. Accepts invitation to sponsor the church as it develops covenant, and is introduced to the leaders of the process in that church and in the Association.	5a. If not: church and Association agree to remain as ecumenical colleagues. **OR:** 5b. If so: the process of developing covenant begins with naming a committee to represent the Association, and naming a Sponsor church and introducing its leaders to the church developing covenant and to the Association contacts.
6. The Covenant Development Committee (and other church leaders) assure widespread conversation, knowledge, and familiarity with the UCC.	6. Become familiar with the church developing covenant, introduce that churches' members to local church life in the UCC, and accompany its leaders to Association, Conference, and Wider Church events. Assures ample opportunity for developing and deepening a relationship.	6. The Covenant Development Committee (and other Association, Conference, and National leaders) assure widespread conversation, knowledge, and familiarity with the Local Church in Covenant Development.
7. The Local Church, in consultation with the Association, determines its readiness to enter into the unique covenant of membership in the United Church of Christ.	7. The sponsoring church provides feedback to all other parties about the opportunities for relationship development which have been pursued.	7. The Association representatives, in close consultation with Local Church representatives, determine whether the Local Church and its membership have adequate understanding and appreciation of the UCC to enter into the unique covenant of membership.
8a. The church may decide to remain a close ecumenical colleague of the United Church of Christ; **OR:** 8b. The Church may affirm its covenant with the United Church of Christ by making a formal request for standing.	8a. The sponsoring church will remain a close ecumenical colleague of the church; **OR:** 8b. The sponsoring church will affirm its relationship with the church as is appropriate in the Association or Conference process.	8a. The Association may decide to remain a close ecumenical colleague of the Local Church; **OR:** 8b. The Association may receive and approve the formal request for standing.
9. The Church and Association will celebrate and consecrate their newly affirmed covenant.	9. The sponsoring church may choose to play a central role in the celebration of the newly affirmed covenant.	9. The Church and Association will celebrate and consecrate their newly affirmed covenant.

Prepared for use in the
Associations of the United Church of Christ
by
The Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team
and
The Evangelism Ministry Team
of
Local Church Ministries
A Covenanted Ministry of the United Church of Christ

Association and Conference:

Representatives:

Contact information:

Planning to Explore Covenant with the United Church of Christ

A congregation considering the United Church of Christ will want to plan the process. The Association or Conference should be involved at the earliest possible time, for informal inquiries, and will be the best guide for ways to explore. When exploration advances into developing a covenant relationship, the plan for this process should, naturally, be made in partnership with the Association or Conference.

Resources for Exploration

Web sites and publications, listed next page
UCC Constitution and Bylaws
UC News publication

Suggestions for Developing the Covenant

- A thorough process of discernment should include a healthy percentage of the lay leaders and members in the exploring church, and from the churches of the Association.
- A delegation from the exploring church should attend at least two Association meetings, and at least one Conference meeting.
- The exploring church's members should review past Synod resolutions, especially on topics of interest to them.
- The exploring church should determine how the Association and Conference can best gain a full knowledge and appreciation of the church's own unique history, culture, and commitments.